



The Holy See

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HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

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“Go... and make disciples of all nation” (*Matth.* 28, 19).

“It was in Antioch that the disciples were called Christians for the first time” (*Act.* 11, 26).

Dear fellow Christians, dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Today, here on the west coast of America, *in San Francisco*, we hear once again the words with which *Jesus sends the apostles* into the world after his Resurrection. He hands on to them a mission. He sends them forth as he himself had been sent by the Father.

These words of Christ come at the end of his earthly *messianic mission*. In his Cross and Resurrection are found the basis for his “authority both in heaven and on earth” (*Matth.* 28, 18). This is *the authority of the Redeemer*, who through the blood of his Cross has ransomed the nations. In them he has established the beginning of a new creation, a new life in the Holy Spirit; in them he has planted *the seed of the Kingdom of God*. In the power of his authority, as he is leaving the earth and going to the Father, Christ says to his Apostles: “Go... and *make disciples of all nations*. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of time” (*Matth.* 28, 19-20).

2. The Acts of the Apostles describe *the beginning of this mission*. The point of departure was the

Upper Room in Jerusalem. *From Jerusalem* the travels of the apostles and of their first collaborators led them first to the neighbouring countries and to the people who lived there. In today's second reading, we hear that the witnesses of the Crucified and Risen Christ reached *Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch* (Cfr. Act. 11, 19).

This occurred also as a result of the dispersion which began with the death of the deacon Stephen and *with the persecution of the disciples of Jesus*. We know that, at the stoning of Stephen, Saul of Tarsus was present as a persecutor. But the Acts of the Apostles later present him as Paul, after his conversion on the road to Damascus. Together with Barnabas, Paul worked for a whole year in Antioch, and there "they instructed many people". And it was precisely "in Antioch that the disciples were *called Christians* for the first time" (*Ibid.* 11, 26).

3. *What does it mean to be a Christian?*

It means accepting the testimony of the apostles concerning the Crucified and Risen Christ. Indeed, it means *accepting Christ himself who works in the power of the Holy Spirit*. This acceptance is expressed in Baptism, the sacrament in which we are born again of water and the Holy Spirit (Cfr. *Jo.* 3, 5). In this sacrament, *Christ comes to meet us spiritually*. As Saint Paul teaches, we are baptized into Christ's death. Together with him we die to sin, in order to rise with him, *to pass from the death of sin to life in God*, to the life of sanctifying grace. To new life!

Christians then are those who have been baptized. We are *those to whom Christ has come with the salvific power of his Paschal Mystery*, those whose lives have been totally shaped by this salvific power. Indeed, Baptism gives us *an indelible sign* - called a character - with which we are marked throughout all our earthly life and beyond. This sign is with us when we die and when we find ourselves before the judgement of God. Even if in practice our lives are not Christian, this indelible sacramental sign of baptism *remains with us for all eternity*.

4. The readings of today's liturgy permit us *to respond still more fully* to the question: What does it mean to be a Christian?

In the book of the Prophet Isaiah we read about "the mountain of the Lord's house" (*Is.* 2, 2), raised above all things. The prophet says: "All nations shall stream towards it; many peoples shall come and says: 'Come, *let us climb the Lord's mountain*, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths'. For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (*Ibid.* 2, 2-3). Yes, *the word of the Lord did go forth from Jerusalem*. This word is the word of the Gospel. The word of the Cross and Resurrection. Christ charged his apostles to go forth with this word to all the nations-to proclaim it and to baptize.

Through baptism Christ comes to every person with the power of his Paschal Mystery. To accept Christ through baptism, to receive new life in the Holy Spirit - this is what it means to become a

Christian. In this way, through the centuries, individuals and entire nations have become Christian

To be a Christian means to go up to the mountain to which Christ leads us. To enter into the temple of the living God that is formed in us and in our midst by the Holy Spirit. To be Christian means to continue to become Christian, learning from Christ *the ways of the Lord* so as to be able "to walk in his paths" (Cfr. *Is. 2, 3*). To be a Christian *means to become one every day*, ascending spiritually towards Christ and *following him*. In fact, as we recall, when Christ first called those who were to become his disciples, he said to them: "Follow me".

5. "It was *in Antioch* that the disciples were called Christians for the first time". And it was more than two hundred years ago that *people in the San Francisco area* were called Christians for the first time. Since the arrival of the first settlers and the missionary efforts of Father Palou and his companions, there have always been Christians in San Francisco - people of the most varied cultural backgrounds who have believed Gods word, been baptized, and followed in the footsteps of the Lord.

Here is *a city built on hopes*: the hopes of Father Serra's Franciscan missionaries who came to preach the Good News, the hopes of pioneers who came to make their fortunes, the hopes of people who came here to seek peace, the hopes of those who still come to find refuge from violence, persecution or dire poverty. It is the city in which, some forty years ago, statesmen met to establish the United Nations Organization, an expression of our common hopes for a world without war, a world committed to justice and governed by fair laws.

But this city was built also with hard work and effort. Here the Church advanced from the little Mission Dolores to the establishment of the Archdiocese of San Francisco in 1853. It took effort and determination for the city and the Church to recover from the devastating effects of the severe earthquake and terrible fire in the spring of 1906. Yes, it takes great effort to move from initial enthusiasm to *something that will really last*. "There are in the end", Saint Paul tells us, "*three things that last: faith, hope and love*, and the greatest of these is love" (*1Cor. 13, 13*). It is precisely these virtues faith and hope and love - that have directed and sustained all the efforts of the Church in San Francisco in the past, and that will sustain her well into the future.

6. It was in Antioch that the disciples were *called Christians* for the first time. Here in San Francisco, and in every city and place, it is necessary for the followers of Jesus *to deepen their communion* with him so that they are not just Christians in name. The primary means the Church has always employed for this task is *a systematic catechesis*.

When Jesus sent his disciples forth on mission, he told them *to baptize and to teach*. Baptism alone is not sufficient. The initial faith and the new life in the Holy Spirit, which are received in baptism, need *to advance to fullness*. After having begun to experience the mystery of Christ, his followers must develop their understanding of it. They must come to know better Jesus himself

and the Kingdom which he proclaimed; they must discover God's promises in the Scriptures, and learn the requirements and demands of the Gospel.

In the Acts of the Apostles we are told that the members of the first Christian community in Jerusalem "devoted themselves to *the apostles' instruction* and the *communal life*, to the *breaking of bread* and the *prayers*" (Act. 2, 42). Here we have a model of the Church that can serve as a goal of all catechesis. For the Church needs continually to feed on God's word which comes to us from the apostles, and she needs to celebrate the Eucharist, to be faithful to regular prayer and bear witness to Christ in the ordinary life of the community.

The experience of history has proved the importance of a carefully programmed study of the whole of the Christian mystery. "*Teach them to carry out everything* I have commanded you", Jesus tells the apostles (Cfr. *Matth.* 28, 20). There is no substitute for a *systematic presentation of all the essentials* of our Catholic faith, a presentation which can provide the basis for sound judgements about the problems of life and society, and which can prepare people to stand up for what they believe with both humility and courage. As I stated in my Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis: "Firm and well-thought-out convictions lead to courageous and upright action... Authentic catechesis is always an orderly and systematic initiation into the revelation that God has given of himself to humanity in Christ Jesus, a revelation stored in the depths of the Church's memory and in Sacred Scripture, and constantly communicated from one generation to the next by a living, active *traditio*" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Catechesi Tradendae*, 22).

7. What is the purpose of catechesis? What does it mean, not only to be called Christians, but truly to the Christians? It means *being identified with Christ*, not only at Mass on Sunday - which is extremely important - but also in all the other activities of life. In speaking about our relationship to him, Jesus himself said: "Remember what I told you: no slave is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours" (*Io.* 15, 20).

To be identified with Christ means that we must live according to God's word. As the Lord told his first disciples: "You will live in my love *if you keep my commandments*, even as I have kept my Father's commandments and live in his love" (*Ibid.* 15, 10). For this reason the Church never ceases to proclaim the whole of the Gospel message, whether it is popular or unpopular, convenient or inconvenient. And the Church is ever mindful of her great task to call people to conversion of mind and heart, just as Jesus did. The first words spoken by Jesus in the Gospel are these: "This is the time of fulfilment. The reign of God is at hand! *Reform your lives and believe in the Gospel*" (*Marc.* 1, 15).

8. Those who accept the grace of conversion and who live according to God's word find that, with God's grace, they begin to put on the mind and heart of Christ. They become increasingly identified with *Christ*, who is *a sign of contradiction*. It was Simeon who first foretold that the

newborn Son of Mary would be for his own people a sign of contradiction. He tells the Virgin Mother: "This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, *a sign that will be opposed*" (*Luc. 2, 34*). And so it happened. Jesus met with opposition in the message that he preached, and in the all-embracing love that he offered to everyone. Almost from the beginning of his public ministry, he was in fact "*a sign that people opposed*".

Simeon's words hold *true for every generation*. Christ remains today a sign of contradiction—a sign of contradiction in his Body, the Church. Therefore, it should not surprise us if, in our efforts to be faithful to Christ's teachings, we meet with criticism, ridicule or rejection. "*If you find that the world hates you*", the Lord told the twelve, "*know that it has hated me before you*. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own; the reason it hates you is that you do not belong to the world. But I chose you out of the world" (*Jo. 15, 18-19*).

These words of our loving Saviour are true for us not only as individuals but *also as a community*. In fact, the witness to Christ of the entire Christian community has a greater impact than that of a single individual. How important, then, is the Gospel witness of every Christian community, but especially that most fundamental of them all, *the Christian family*. In the face of many common evils, the Christian family that truly lives the truth of the Gospel in love is most certainly a sign of contradiction; and at the same time it is a source of great hope for those who are eager to do good. Parishes, too, and dioceses, and all other Christian communities which "do not belong to the world", find themselves meeting opposition *precisely because they are faithful to Christ*. The mystery of the Cross of Christ is renewed in every generation of Christians.

9. When Jesus Christ sent his apostles throughout all the world, he ordered them to "*teach all the nations*" (Cfr. *Matth. 28, 19-20*).

The Gospel, and together with it the salvific power of Christ's Redemption, is addressed to every person in every nation. It is also addressed to *entire nations and peoples*. In his vision, the prophet *Isaiah sees the peoples* who go up to the mountain of the house of the Lord, asking to be instructed in his ways and to walk in *his paths* (Cfr. *Is. 2, 2-3*). We too ask to walk in the paths of the living God, the Creator and Redeemer, the one God who lives in inscrutable unity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Continuing to describe his vision, Isaiah says:

*"He shall judge between the nations,
and impose terms on many peoples.
They shall beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
One nation shall not raise the sword against another,
nor shall they train for war again"* (*Ibid. 2, 4*).

How greatly we desire to see the future of humanity in the light of these prophetic words! *How greatly we desire a world in which justice and peace prevail!* Can the Church, which has come forth from such a prophecy - the Church of the Gospel - ever cease to proclaim *the message of peace* on earth? Can she ever cease to work for the true progress of peoples? Can she ever cease to work for the true dignity of every human person?

To be Christian also means to proclaim *this message* untiringly in every generation, in our generation, at the end of the second millennium and at the threshold of the third!

“O house of Jacob, come,
let us walk in the light of the Lord!” Amen.

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